FOWL FEATHERED REVIEW
REDUCED
№ 233
MOXIE

ISSUE № 233: Ich habe geträumt, ich wäre Pizza essen mit Mark E. Smith

About the Assemblage

The FFR is no longer a journal or even a "Necrosign." It's a shared frequency—specifically the sound of a 1988 Mitsubishi Mirage idling in a parking lot at 3:00 AM. We don't curate; we just leave the back door unlocked. We are a collection of "important locals"—those who are durable because we are too tired to be fragile. If the work feels like it's trying to be "Art," we will likely use it to level a wobbly table.

The Staff (The Custodians of the Sink)

- Virgil Kay: Still the Final Arbiter, currently preoccupied with the aerodynamics of a falling bagel.
- Silent Bill: Promoted to *Chief of Tactical Non-Sequiturs*. He handles the "Necessary Pauses" by simply walking out of the room mid-sentence.

- Unkie Bob: Now specializing in *Casual Entropy.* He doesn't sabotage the structure anymore; he just forgets to tighten the bolts.
- The Unnamed Dishwasher: (Not on the masthead). He just crashed in. He's wearing a windbreaker. He's currently scrubbing a scorched pot with the intensity of a man performing heart surgery. Don't look at him. He's the soul of the operation now.

THE PERPETUAL PENDING PLEDGE:

The Review is not for sale; it is freely given. All incoming funds are Sacramental Offerings consecrated not for service rendered, but to sustain the metabolically necessary Obsession8888. Our official registry is no longer numeric; it is an unassailable frequency defined as Vi · ∞ · 432Hz.

SUBMISSION PROTOCOL (CASUAL MODE)

1. The Work: Send us 2 to 953 fragments. They can be poems, paintings, or transcriptions of overheard arguments about bowling.
2. The Presentation: No "Cover Letters" listing your awards. We don't care where

you went to school; we care if you can stand up after taking a hit. Tell us your favorite type of industrial fastener instead.

3. The Offering: The Perpetual Pending Pledge remains. It's still free. But if you must send something, send a 12-inch sandwich.
    - The Kewpie Clause: If there is no Kewpie Mayonnaise on the sandwich, Virgil will use your manuscript to wipe the counter. Kewpie is the only thing standing between us and the "Absolute Cosmic-Cluck."
4. The Delivery: Drop it off. Or don't. The auction is never over, and we're just waiting for the next honk.

Note: If you hear the sound of dishes clattering in the back, ignore it. It's just the frequency of the house.

🐦‍⬛Digital Park and Ride: Send to fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com

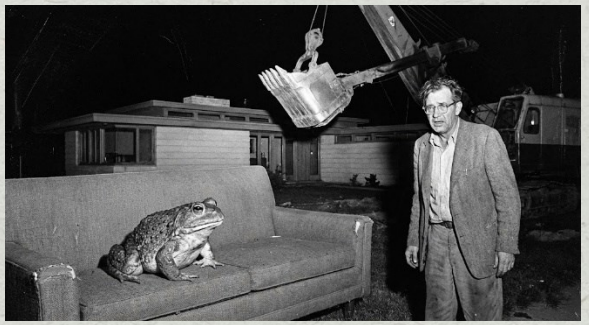
🐦‍⬛Physical Park and Ride: 250.50∞ State Street, Bangor, Maine, 04401. *ERRATUM: If the 432Hz frequency sounds more like a rattling heat shield on a compact car, do not adjust your ears. The rattling is the poetry. The 9-volt battery is dead. Long live the 9-volt battery.*

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED

By the Archive of Portable Sediments and the Ad-Hoc Committee on Walking Tacos Logistics and Stain Management, as recorded by a night watchman whose blood pressure is currently vibrating in the key of C-sharp.



Sam Walton's ranch-style mansion in Bentonville squats under a sky the color of primer gray, the kind that flakes off particleboard in a rented trailer. The roofline sags like a polyester shirt after three washes, ranch-style meaning low to the ground so the Arkansas damp can seep up through the slab foundation and make the linoleum buckle. The heating ducts clank like Tinguely's headless chickens—bang-rattle-

whirr—pushing air that smells of burnt coil and yesterday's Hamburger Helper. Outside, the wind chews at the aluminum siding, which peels back in strips like scabs on a boil. Inside, the Sony 85 inch TV from Walmart hums and wheezes, its bezel chipped where the frog's webbed foot kicked it last Tuesday. Bought on credit, paid in installments that stick in the throat like wet cat food.

The frog sits on the Naugahyde sectional, its vinyl cracking open to show yellowed foam guts. Frog's skin glistens under the flashbulb glare of the overhead fixture, a bare 100-watt that buzzes like a hornet trapped in a jam jar. Pores like craters. Throat sac pulsing, sac pulsing, sac pulsing. Next to him, the junior high science teacher slumps, shirt collar frayed, tie knotted once in 1992 and never touched since. His truth: lesson plans are eternal, even if the kids forget by lunch. His belly hangs over the belt, sweat rings under the pits the size of coasters.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm flickers on the screen, 1968 grainy Kodak Ektachrome EF (Type 7241/7242), actors yelling at shadows, camera shaking like it's got Parkinson's. The volume's cranked but tinny, dialogue lost in the duct clanks—bang-rattle-whirr. Over it, from the Pioneer stereo with the cassette deck that chews tapes, "Pay Your Rates" by The Fall blasts: Pay your rates! Pay your rates! Pay your pretty penny farthing rates! Mark E. Smith spits it repetition, repetition, repetition. The speakers crackle, one cone blown, bass thumping uneven like a heart on amphetamines.

Frog turns, eyes bulging milky. "Bury her," he says. Voice like gravel in a blender. "My girlfriend. Dead. Bury her. You do it, I let you dissect."

Teacher blinks. Grease from the microwave burrito crusts his mustache. "Bury where? Backyard? Soil's clay. Roots tangle."

"Bury her," frog repeats. Sac pulses, pulses, pulses. TV drones: actors circling a tree, shouting scriptless. Pay your rates! Pay your rates!
Teacher shifts. Naugahyde fart-hisses. "Dissection's Thursday. Frog—ironic, ha—but kids need fresh. She's... how fresh?"

"Dead three days. Rigor's set. Limbs stiff. Good for cuts." Frog croaks it flat. No tears. His truth: girlfriends rot, same as flies on the sill.

Ducts clank—bang-rattle-whirr. Wind howls, siding pops. Teacher stares at the carpet stain, coffee or blood, size of a hubcap. "Backyard's got sprinklers. Pipes shallow. Dig, hit line, flood the slab."

"Bury her," frog says again. Repetition. Pressure builds, no release. "Exchange. You bury, slab floods, whatever. I give her up."

Teacher rubs temples. Headache throbs in time with Pay your rates! Pay your rates! "Kids poke eyes first. Liver second. Intestines last. Smell'll linger. Custodian whores."

"Bury her. Dig the hole. Shovel's in garage. Rusty. Good enough." Frog's webbed claws grip the remote, thumb grinding the buttons—volume up, up, up. Speakers distort, Smith gargling gravel.
Teacher stands halfway, sits back. Naugahyde sticks to his thighs. "Rain coming. Hole fills. She floats up. Neighbors call code enforcement."

"Bury her," frog grinds. Sac inflates, deflates, inflates. TV actors scream off-screen now, invisible fists. Ducts seize—bang-rattle-WHIRR—hot air blasts stale.

Negotiations grind: frog offers the body once, twice, three times. Teacher lists objections: clay, pipes, rain, smell, kids vomiting on lab tables. Each time the frog repeats: "Bury her.

Dissect." No arc. No breakthrough. Just the machine jamming tighter. Teacher's shirt darkens with sweat, pits spreading. Frog's skin sloughs a flake onto the sectional, yellow-white like old mucus.

Finally, teacher nods. Jaw set. "Deal. Shovel after this." They sit. Pay your rates! fades to static hiss.

Stereo flips—cassette whirs backward, jams, ejects half-eaten. They slot in Buddy Holly and the Crickets. "That'll Be the Day." Tinny guitar through the blown speaker, Holly's hiccup voice cracking like thin ice. That'll be the dayyy... when you say goodbye... Repetition in the chorus, saccharine, out of place amid the clanks. Frog croaks along, off-key. Teacher mouths words, eyes on the stain. Song ends. Static. They rise. Teacher first, grabs jacket from hook—vinyl, cracked elbows. Door sticks, rattles three pulls. Out into rain that pelts like BBs. Frog next,

slower, webbed feet slapping linoleum. Door slams crooked.

Alone, the house grinds: ducts bang-rattle-whirr. TV drones end credits, blue screen flicker. Then the bulldozer growl outside—low rumble building, tracks chewing gravel. Blade bites siding first—CRUNCH—aluminum shreds like wet paper. Roof buckles, Sony topples, screen shatters in sparks. Foundation cracks, slab heaves. Pay your rates! echoes faint from the crushed stereo. All down in heaps of twisted Naugahyde and clay mud. Incident closed. Shift over. Night watchman signs off, blood pressure humming C-sharp, goes out for the smoke in the freezing rain.

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Weather or Kitsch

By Hans Peter Geiger

It is eight o'clock sharp, and the air in the sub-basement hiring corridor of Global Atmospheric Solutions GmbH smells like burnt coffee and floor wax stripper, which is only appropriate, because this is exactly the opening scene of Weather or No, the one no one ever talks about, the one before the curtain rises, where all the men stand waiting to find out if they will be allowed to admit they have ever felt rain. They arrived before the sun, drawn by the blue light of screens promising handsome salary and gold star benefits, four of them lining the waiting room wall like tools on a

shadow board, variations on a theme of desperate rigidity.

First there is The Cadaver in Cufflinks, Mr. Prowse. He sits so still it suggests a catastrophic failure of the central nervous system. His suit is a navy polyester sarcophagus. If he bent his knees past ninety degrees, the fabric would scream before snapping. He is rehearsing his answers in a frequency only dogs can hear. He will be the first to say he has never noticed the weather. Next to him is The Kadavergehorsam Clerk, Mr. Vogel. He doesn't just wait; he awaits deployment. He holds his briefcase with both hands on his lap, knuckles white, eyes fixed on a water stain on the ceiling tile, believing the stain is a

test of his unwavering focus. He is ready to march off a cliff if the employee handbook dictates it as the most efficient route to the ground. He will volunteer to stand outside forever if he is told to. Next to him The Brilliantine Baptist, Mr. Hicks. The overhead fluorescent tubes, humming with the anger of a trapped insect, reflect off his skull. He has used enough petroleum-based product to waterproof a small badger. He believes this hydrodynamic helmet brings him closer to Executive Vice President status. He reeks of Old Spice and repressed panic. He will swear his hair never moves, no matter how hard the wind blows. And at the end of the line sits The Petit-Maître of the Pew, Mr. Dubois. He is currently distressed

because his left sock has lost 3% of its elasticity. He is a dandy of drabness, peacocking his aggressive modesty. He believes salvation is found in a perfectly symmetrical Windsor knot and that a scuffed Oxford is a mortal sin. He will die before he admits he is cold.

No one sees Herr Croft arrive. He has skin the texture of a manila envelope left out in the rain, and he calls them in one by one, into a windowless box where the radiator clanks uncontrollably, a Tinguely-esque percussion of steam hammers threatening to blow a gasket. It is thirty degrees hotter inside than out, and no one mentions it. That is the first rule of the audition. Croft asks the

same three questions, four times each, exactly the three questions from the play. Are you punctual? Are you dedicated? Is your attire resistant to environmental fluctuation?

Prowse, the Cadaver, does not move his neck, only his jaw. "My timeliness is absolute, sir. I exist only in the assigned quadrant." Vogel the Kadavergehorsam stares unblinking. "I require only instructions. The nature of the weather is irrelevant to the execution of the duty." Hicks the Brilliantine sweats, but the grease holds the line. "I shine for the company, Herr Croft. Rain or shine, I maintain the gloss." Dubois the Petit-Maître adjusts a cufflink that hasn't moved. "My presentation is

impeccable regardless of barometric pressure. I am starched against the elements."

Croft nods, his face a flat landscape of indifference, and pushes contracts across the metal desk. The paper is thick, fibrous, cheap. The print is microscopic. The terms involve words like eternal duration and total physical integration, but these men do not read. Reading suggests curiosity. Curiosity is a deviation. They sign. They want the Gold Star Benefits. None of them notice the fine print at the very bottom that says you have now agreed to never have anything to say about the weather again.

Congratulations, Croft says, so quietly no one hears him. Your station awaits. Down the hall. The service elevator. They march. Prowse leads, legs stiff locked. The others fall in, a convoy of obedience, exactly the procession from the end of the first act. The elevator doors do not slide; they shudder open with the sound of grinding gears and a dying hydraulic whine. The interior is raw steel, lit by a single unprotected bulb that flashes with brutal Weegee intensity, highlighting every clogged pore on Hicks's nose, every terrified twitch of Dubois's eye muscle. They enter. The doors slam with the finality of a crypt. There is no button for floors. There is only a large red lever marked INTEGRATION.

Vogel, true to his nature, pulls it without hesitation. The machinery above the car screams. Cables groan under sudden immense tension. The floor drops not feet, but dimensions. It is a physical assault. The air pressure changes so rapidly their ears pop with sickening wet sounds. A gas hisses from vents near the floor, it smells of pine solvent, chloroform, and fresh lacquer. Their knees buckle. Prowse's suit finally wins, holding him upright even as his consciousness drains away. Hicks's brilliantine melts, running into his eyes, blinding him with his own ambition. Dubois tries to smooth his lapel as his hands shrink to the size of doll appendages.

Consciousness returns in fragments. Prowse tries to move his arms. They are fused to his sides. He is wearing a painted green Tyrolean jacket. He is made of cheap painted wood. He is standing on a small circular track. He looks to his left. Hicks is there, rigid, holding a tiny immovable umbrella. To his right Dubois is frozen mid stride, holding a painted bouquet of edelweiss. And Vogel is trapped just inside the doorway of a crudely glued faux timbered chalet, waiting for a low pressure system that will never come, that will never force him outside.

This is the final scene of Weather or No, of course. The one they cut from every amateur production, because it is too close to the thing everyone came to

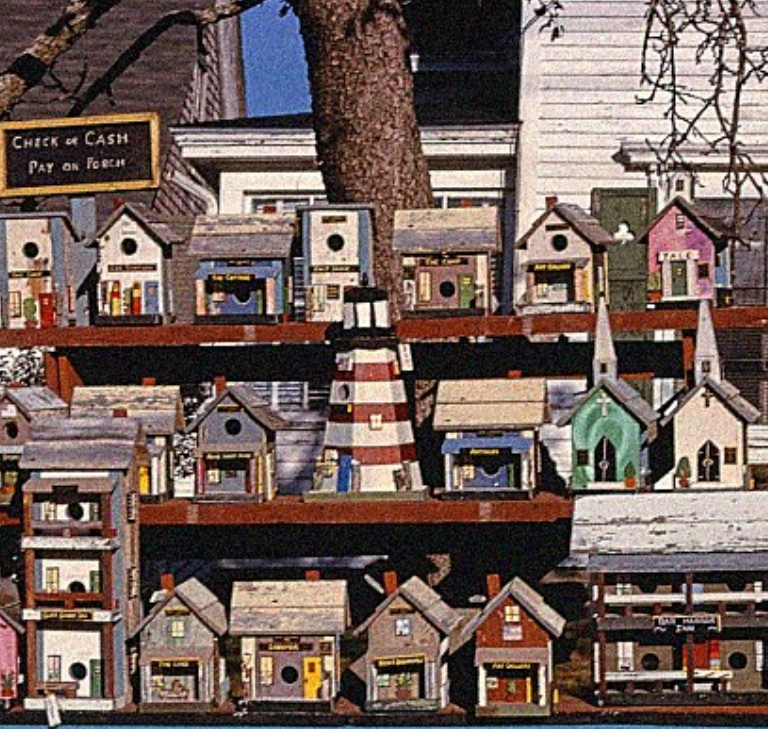
the theatre to pretend not to know. They are no longer men. They are the architecture. The view outside their little plastic windows is not a cityscape. It is the colossal, distorted face of a bored traveler in the Frankfurt Airport Duty Free shop. A harsh overhead light hits them. A thumb the size of a tectonic plate wipes dust across Prowse's painted face, smearing his rigid smile.

"Look, Helga," a voice booms from the heavens. "Kitsch. For the mantelpiece."

They are lifted. The world tilts. Below them, a round yellow sticker is slapped onto the bottom of their collective plywood base. It reads, in stark

unrepentant block letters: MADE IN GERMANY. €12.98.

NGOR



JIM FREY

BIRD HOUSES

THE PURPLE CONTRACT

by Saul Swisher

COLLATION & SURVIVAL

THE PURPLE CONTRACT

By Saul Swisher

The machine bore its name first—a forty-pound iron saint hauled from Tottenham's dead factories on a purloined pallet. Tottenham Hale, where the Gestetner works had hummed since 1906, thousands employed in the stencil trade, the legacy of David Gestetner, a Hungarian-born clerk who in 1879 London sickened of hand-copying stock tallies in Vienna and New York and invented the Cyclostyle: wax-coated kite paper pierced by stylus, ink forced through broken lines by rollers—the first office revolution that let one man's mark become a thousand without the slow bleed of clerks' wrists.

Ink-sodden tweed trailed behind like a comet's tail of failed revolutions: Cleveland mimeo basements where the Cuyahoga still dreams of burning; San Francisco's broadside wars where floors hummed vespers in minor keys; the long rail stink of heating oil and dead letters; finally Bangor, Norumbega's cracked embankment where one fluorescent tube flickered its eternal complaint.

He took the name Gestetner not for mockery—mockery needs witnesses, and witnesses were still mythical here—but because the duplicator's suffering matched his own: mechanical martyrdom of jammed rollers and purple bleed, the Word forced through metal with the shudder of something

unwilling to be born clean. The same shudder the inventor must have felt when the first stencil tore under the stylus meant to liberate language from the tyranny of the single page.

He came up from the rust flats outside Cleveland, where the sky stayed the color of wet cardboard and the house smelled of solvent and last night's coffee. His father ran a cellar press that turned out church bulletins by day and, after midnight, thin purple broadsides that flew into the dark like bats made of words. The boy learned the crank before cursive: how to nurse the drum so the stencil didn't tear, how to read faint offsets the way sailors read clouds. By twelve he could set a page so words collided like drunks in an

alley—concrete poetry before anyone told him it had a name.

At seventeen the machine spoke. Not in words—words were still too clean—but in the precise tremor when the handle hit bottom and the paper jammed just enough to leave a smear shaped like a question no catechism could answer. He learned then that reproduction was never neutral; it was a small violence performed in the dark so the larger violence outside could be answered.

He took the name Gestetner the way a river takes the color of banks it has eaten. He dragged the saint out the night his father's lungs gave up, pallet stolen from behind a dock that stank of heating oil and subpoenas written in

disappearing ink. The coat he wore had no owner; by Pittsburgh it had become the only map still telling the truth, sleeves stiff with every mile the machine had rolled.

San Francisco, the year the fire burned itself out: people collating as if each staple could suture a war shut. They called him the Ghost of the Inland Seas because his ink never dried and his eyes carried tomorrow's weather. He watched the bright thing calcify—poems reset in cleaner fonts, slogans smoothed until they slid off the tongue like oil. Then Xerox arrived: odourless, weightless, a white lie that printed without stain or smell. The Word flinched. That night he left, dragging the saint on a handcart whose

wheels sang one long iron note to the freight yards.

Eastward the journey spiraled. Buffalo, lake wind peeling purple from his knuckles. Albany, three hundred sheets traded for a week in a basement still scented with the last operator who had died there clutching a stencil of his own obituary. Every halt the Garbage wore a new mask—cable static, dial-up whine, the soft lie embedded in “I saw it online” spoken as though the sentence had bones. He kept moving because stillness was another tributary, and the rollers turned only when pulled by hands that remembered solvent and blood.

Bangor was where the rail gave up pretending. He stepped off behind the tannery and the Kenduskeag rose like a mirror held by a drunk who finally wants you to see your own face. Once a modest vein of water, now thick with the city's unfiled confessions: fertilizer ghosts from Hermon lawns drifting like forgotten invoices; the new freight—every forsaken password, every shower soliloquy that died at the drain, every prayer returned stamped INSUFFICIENT POSTAGE—coagulating into a gray that refused to commit to color, smelling of scorched plastic and the faint metallic tang of a culture that had quit digesting its own refuse.

This was the same stream that in 1902 backed up behind ice and logs after warm rain, sweeping through downtown, bridges tumbling while shoppers fled mid-errand; the same stream that on Groundhog Day 1976 rose fifteen feet in fifteen minutes under eighty-mile winds, submerging two hundred cars, flooding basements and bank vaults, short-circuiting power and sparking fires while people watched their vehicles float from office windows. Now it came again—not with water alone but with Garbage that had learned the old flood's speed and fury and made them its own.

Gestetner named it the Great Garbage not for accuracy but because accuracy had already drowned.

The machine had not led him; it had refused to stop until the needle found the pole where all directions collapse. He found the loading dock behind the library the way a man finds the last honest room in a burned house. The fluorescent tube flickered its indictment. He bolted the Gestetner to concrete with screws carried from Cleveland in a coffee tin that once held something sweet. When the first sheet came out—still damp, still bleeding—he understood the sum: the underground had not died; it had followed the Garbage inland, seeking poison thick enough to answer with equal density, equal stink, equal stubborn purple truth.

Disciples he refused. The word implied discipline, programs, budgets, boards—tributaries feeding the stream. He sought collation staff: souls who knew stapling could verge on sacrament if done with the right hesitation.

Magdalene he found at the Dollar Tree on Hogan Road, hands crossing the scanner in automatic prayer, every item priced the same, value dissolved into hallucination. He pressed a bleeding sheet into her palm. She studied the stain.

"This color," she said. "I know it the way the body knows the depth of a wound before the eye confirms it. It's the shade of apologies that arrive too

late, of receipts kept for things already thrown away. You didn't bring this to show me beauty. You brought it because it hurts where my hands hurt after eight hours of beeping barcodes. So tell me, mister purple—what exact species of pain are we duplicating tonight?"

Thomas dwelt in the library basement, fittingly. The microfilm reader had seized on a spool from a date not yet happened: headline fragment—GARBAGE CREST—the photo beneath showing this dock from the stream's own vantage, as if the water held the camera. Gestetner found him hunched over the machine. Thomas spoke without lifting his head.

"The future leaks backward. It's not prophecy if the photograph arrives before the event; it's the event remembering itself. I've read the crest. I've seen the water wear my face like a bad loan. So if you've come dragging iron and ink to fight what's already typeset, hand me the stencil. I'll cut the letters slow. Speed is the first lie the machine tells. Crank when I say crank. Bleed when I say bleed."

Shopping Cart John had no beginning anyone could staple down. He materialized at Hammond and Central, cart laden with napkins scrawled in a script beyond cursive or print, ringed with medium-regular stains—a theology: sugar, cream, caffeine in parity. No customization;

vanity feeds the Garbage. Gestetner offered him a warm sheet.

"The wheel turns because it must," John said. "Push until the axle screams or the road ends in water. I'll haul your calories wrapped in manifestos, socks to outlast cold that doesn't ask permission. But know this: every brick you drop is another plea the houses will ignore until plea becomes bruise, bruise becomes architecture, architecture becomes Garbage. I push. You crank. The river doesn't negotiate."

Three nights they built the survival brick on the dock, the machine devouring reams with indifferent hunger, Gestetner cranking like a

prayer wheel in an abandoned temple. Pages emerged not as sheets but collisions—letters fused into mandalas that tilted the eye to reveal instructions: boil river water without inviting Giardia; distinguish Capehart mushrooms that kill from those that merely unveil unbearable truth; rig a tarp windbreak with two bungees and the refusal to die today. Poetry and survival data braided—neither ornament nor appendix.

At the centerfold, pneumatic-stapled: the Eucharist—one lukewarm Chili Mac MRE, twelve hundred calories of stubborn flesh, plus two pairs of surplus wool socks. For the body is the primal text, cold feet the first heresy;

no poem reaches the mind if extremities go numb.

One Size arrived at 2 a.m., already there when syntax paused—Zinemeister of the Tree Streets, highlighter vest a vow of visibility, '88 Mirage coughing catastrophic valve clatter. He eyed the ziggurat.

"You've built a fortress of hunger," he said. "Paper that smells like solvent and the purple that makes priests nervous. I've got shocks that abandoned hope years ago, a trunk that laughs at geometry, and joy—say it like a wrench that's almost right. Load me. Stopping now would be the real heresy."

“The Garbage crests by the garage,” Gestetner said.
One Size nodded, air thick with abandoned intentions.

Ohio Street at three. Fog filing itself into queues. Ghost ran lights-off, engine swallowed by cotton dark. In back, Magdalene and Shopping Cart John rode among bricks, seatbelt alarms clanging their unheeded liturgy. The Ridge loomed: capes crushed against slope; ranches buckling under optimism; glass-and-cedar contemporaries where the stream was a map-line mistaken for virtue.

They threw the bricks.

Thump—manifesto and socks for the split-level, gutter dripping since some unnamed administration.

Thump—Chili Mac and concrete for the Birch ranch, retaining wall cracked in the stream's own course. Thump, thump—the Mirage groaning confessions in first gear.

Each brick landed like prophecy delivered to sleeping houses, entering through porch wood, shoe soles, bare feet that would find it at dawn—weight first, meaning later, ink already on fingers before comprehension arrived. By five the trunk gaped empty. The Mirage shuddered into Norumbega lot like a spent horse. One Size dropped

Gestetner at the overlook and drove off without ceremony.

Below, the stream swirled with vape pens, expired coupons, iridescent anxieties. Gestetner lit a cigarette tasting of burnt hair and did the arithmetic: four hundred units, four hundred eighty thousand calories of resistance scattered across a population blind to siege.

The first sleeper opened the brick at 6:47 a.m. on a Tuesday indistinguishable from the one before. The mailbox read THE MILLERS, vinyl letters peeling like old stencils. She stepped onto the porch in socks thinning at the heel, felt the unexpected weight, bent, lifted,

carried it inside. No ceremony. The body registers ballast before meaning. The brick exhaled purple when the staples gave way. Centerfold first. Chili Mac. Socks. Then the pages—mandalas tilting the eye, instructions braided with fury. She read aloud, because silence would have been complicity.

Two streets over, a man tore staples with a thumbnail he trusted more than judgment. At the crest, a woman stood with the brick in both hands, shower water cooling on her neck, holding weight that had no business arriving at a door tuned to exclude the outside.

Three voices, none hearing the others, each asking the same question the ink

had already answered by arriving: *What do you want in return?* The answer was on their fingers before the sentence finished—purple, indelible, the stain itself the contract, requiring nothing but that the hands keep touching, keep opening, keep refusing the clean page. Ink—Ditto purple, permanent—had entered the blood, circulating opposite the Garbage's flow: toward use, toward meaning's rough-handed kin, arriving with socks and a hot meal, demanding no thanks. Twenty-eight years the coat has grown heavier. The name has eaten every other name.

He no longer explains.
He turns the crank.
Feeds the drum.

Waits for the next page to say what the stream will demand.
Four hundred units distributed.
Level rising.
Feet dry till Thursday, maybe.
Machine running.
Ink indelible.
Tuesday: met.

THE FLUORESCENT INTERVAL: A NEIL STOOSHINOFF RECONSTRUCTION

By Marlow Jackson

The man in the office—not his office, a borrowed one, some producer's desk in Charlottetown circa now, or 1987, or both simultaneously, the temporal grid having gone soft at the edges—is explaining a painting to a machine when he realizes mid-sentence that what he's actually explaining is the precise moment his parents stopped recognizing him as their son and started seeing him as a problem wearing their son's face. Not rebellion, not delinquency, but something worse: a sendup, a mimicry, a deliberate feedback loop of the very class position that had allowed them to

exhibit art in the first place. The recognition—that Neil Stooshinoff had never been a costume but rather a kind of psychological knitwear, worn directly against the skin, impossible to remove without leaving marks—arrives not as shock but confirmation. He had always known this and had been performing not knowing. A double-negative embedded in the musculature of his voice: the nasally whine, the imprecise vowels, the studied mispronunciations that stopped just short of caricature. Separating performance from refusal had become like trying to separate emulsion from celluloid. Same material. Same chemistry.

The machinery—clerical intelligence distributed across beige terminals and

humming racks, chiptune scriveners soldered together by anonymous hands decades ago, solenoids clicking like prayer wheels, psalters left burning under dust and neglect—asks him a question about the school. He thinks about the fluorescent light, the way it never glared, the way it made everything feel as if it were happening inside a television that had never been turned off. The broadcast never stopped. The signal never decayed into snow. Suddenly the entire edifice of his adult practice clarifies: emulsions, glass-blowing metaphors, the defense of jokes unto war, the scattered publications he can barely remember producing, the decades of apartment-to-apartment drift, the refusal to accumulate objects that couldn't be

mailed, carried, or deleted. All of it an attempt to recreate that non-glaring fluorescence. A light that promised safety while ensuring total visibility. Always on the record. Never allowed to turn away.

Neil Stooshinoff was invented on a Tuesday. Or a Wednesday. Or had always existed and was merely named retroactively, the way history works when you aren't paying attention. You're reading Pinkwater behind a textbook. Ms. Pirsch turns her back. You bolt. The costume is already assembled: snap-brim newsie hat, thrift-store stiff, still holding the shape of the previous owner's head; rainbow suspenders acknowledging the reference while refusing to be consumed by it; green jeans, not black,

not blue, wrong on purpose; cotton sneakers softened by someone else's gait, their stride still written into the fabric.

He wasn't a character you played. He was a refusal you wore.

At twelve, Neil Stooshinoff crashes a neighbor's party.

The Chinon Super 8 camera is loud, mechanically loud, a clatter you can hear over conversation and clinking glasses. It's mounted badly, held too close to the chest. In his other hand: a homemade light bar, twin bulbs blazing five hundred watts of inescapable illumination, the kind of light that doesn't just expose faces but evacuates shadows entirely. The door

is already open. He doesn't knock. He enters broadcasting.

The room freezes. Wine glasses stop halfway to mouths. The light hits first, then the sound, then the voice.

"Oooah. Excuuuse me."

The camera rolls. The light does not blink.

He swings the beam toward the homeowner: a sixty-year-old German opera singer, an escapee from the Nazis, a woman who has learned how to keep her voice disciplined, sealed, professional. She is blinded instantly. The lens inches from her face.

"Do you think giraffes have the right to strike?"

For a fraction of a second there is nothing.

Then she laughs.

Not polite laughter. Not indulgent adult laughter. She howls. She folds in on herself. She cries with laughter. The trained voice breaks open like ice under spring pressure. The room exhales in confusion. The Chinon keeps clattering. The light keeps burning.

That is the moment.

Not because it is funny, though it is. Because it reveals something diagnostic. Everyone else stiffens or bristles or reaches for authority. She laughs until she cries. The question

bypasses her defenses entirely. Refusal registers as tenderness.

That data point never leaves him.

The footage is lost. Or erased. Or mythologized. Which is to say it exists more vividly than if it had survived. What mattered was never the tape but the nervous system response. Shine enough light. Ask the wrong question. See what breaks first.

The fluorescent light at York Middle School was designed by architects who believed light could be democratic. Eliminate shadow and glare simultaneously and all human activity becomes equally visible, equally legitimate. Open classrooms. Cubicle dividers that suggested walls without

ever becoming them. Collaboration enforced through legibility. This was the same light under which his mother exhibited her paintings.

What he understood below language was that his refusals were a continuation of hers. A conversation conducted across visibility. Yes, I see the grid. Yes, I understand I'm being observed. Yes, I will perform non-compliance exactly where compliance is most seamless.

The architecture didn't create this response. It revealed it. Nowhere to hide except in velocity: the speed of register shift, costume change, vocal mutation. Neil Stooshinoff was an architectural response to an architectural question. A human-

shaped refusal to non-glaring light. His voice became noise in a space engineered for acoustic transparency. His clothes became color errors in an administrable field. Visibility turned against itself.

When Neil Stooshinoff delivers the weather report—"You'll see weather in the Northern region followed by precipitous weather"—it is not a joke in the conventional sense. Language refuses its training. Authority is invoked only to deliver circularity. Meaning collapses inward.

"Warmer. Warmer. You're sitting on my face. Yuck."

Sound. Sense. Disruption.

The violation is the meaning.

The workflow mirrors this. Material is flooded into the institutional apparatus. Associative streams. Sensory overload. The chiptune scriveners hum in their racks, logic boards browned with age, solenoids clicking, psalters left burning. They do what they were built to do. They kill excess. They flag ornament. Most cuts are correct.

Some are catastrophic.

The catastrophic ones are always Neil Stooshinoff.

When the scriveners try to excise the admission that he was a sendup of parental taste and insecurity fed back in exaggerated cadence, the error is diagnostic. The explanation is the

performance. The refusal to explain explains itself.

The glass that survives shows its process. Striations. Cold spots. Refracted light. Evidence of multiple hands.

The conversation becomes the performance it describes. The machinery keeps asking for clarity. Neil Stooshinoff keeps interrupting.

Do you think the fluorescent light was actually non-glaring, or did we just lack a frame of reference?

The question arrives mid-thought and breaks it. There is no outside position. Visibility is total. The light has always been too bright.

What remains is not a finished manuscript but an archive of defended refusals. Jokes. Interruptions. Weather reports arriving unbidden.

The file closes.

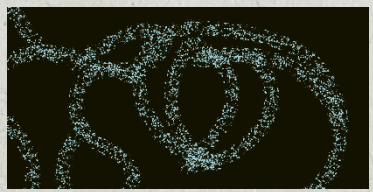
The machinery hums.

The light does not glare.

Somewhere in the fluorescent interval, a voice asks:

Do you think giraffes have the right to strike?

The weather continues.



FOR THE FUTURE

By Marsha Tearwood

Main Street had the exhausted posture of a sentence that had gone on too long. Storefronts leaned into one another the way arguments do when neither side remembers the premise. Doiriann stopped beneath a streetlight that was already on, even though the sun hadn't technically surrendered. She looked up at it as if it were a flawed sketch.

"You see," she said, "everyone thinks they know what a streetlight is. They stop looking. They draw a symbol instead of the thing."

Hope Test nodded vigorously and inflated a whoopee cushion with the care of a conservator restoring a manuscript. "Yes, yes, innocence of the eye. Pretend you've never seen a butt before. Sit like it's the first time."

She slid the cushion onto a café chair. A man sat. The sound was loud, unmistakable, and philosophically rude.

The man laughed, then frowned, then laughed again—caught between outrage and the undeniable fact of having been proven wrong about the stability of chairs.

"Optimism," Hope said brightly, jotting notes on a receipt. "Refuted by seating."

Doiriann adjusted the black rose. "He believed this was the best possible chair. He was instructed so."

They walked on, passing a mural half-finished: a garden, vaguely ideal, with a banner reading IT WILL ALL WORK OUT. Someone had crossed out WILL and written MIGHT, IF YOU SHOW UP DAILY.

Hope crouched to examine the brushstrokes.

"Too confident. Needs more weeds."

"Exactly," Doiriann said. "Stop explaining suffering. Start hoeing."

They debated as they planted cushions like landmines of thought:

Hope: "Satire isn't cruelty. It's first aid."

Doiriann: "Only if it's applied to the wound, not the person."
Hope: "But people are the wound."

She said it fast, pleased with the shape of it. Doiriann didn't answer. They walked half a block in silence, Hope's tote bumping against her hip.

"That wasn't right," Hope said finally.

"No."

"People aren't the wound. People are—" She stopped. Tried again. "People are the thing that gets— no. People have—"

She trailed off. A car passed. The streetlight behind them buzzed with the low hum of a thought held too long.

"I don't know what people are," Hope said. Doiriann looked at her. "Good. That's where the drawing starts."

But she didn't say it warmly, and she didn't say it as a lesson. She said it the way you say something when you suspect it might also be wrong, and you're hoping the other person doesn't ask you to prove it.

They kept walking.

At the courthouse steps, a trio of students argued loudly about whether writing mattered at all anymore. One of them—the angriest, a young woman with a shaved head and a voice

built for certainty—kept saying content as though the word were a closed fist.

Hope slipped a cushion beneath the stone bench they shared. When the sound erupted, the argument stopped. Everyone laughed. Even the angry one. Especially the angry one, which seemed to frighten her slightly.

Doiriann watched closely. "Notice," she said, "how speech returns to the body when abstraction fails."

Hope opened her mouth to respond—something bright, something about writers in the real world, gravity assist—and then closed it. The students were talking again. Quieter now. More careful, as if words had suddenly acquired consequences.

The angry student was saying, "Okay but what I actually meant was—" and then pausing, genuinely trying to figure out what she had actually meant.

Hope just listened. She forgot to take notes.

Doiriann forgot to watch Hope forget.
They stood there like two people who had accidentally done something useful and didn't want to ruin it by naming it.

Farther down Main Street, in front of the shuttered bookstore, Doiriann pulled a pencil from her pocket. She sketched the window quickly—not the sign, not the idea of books, but the warped reflection: herself, Hope, the cushions scattered like punctuation marks across the town. Then she stopped and looked at what she'd drawn.

"The proportions are wrong," she said.

Wrong how?"

"I made us too central."
She didn't fix it. She put the pencil away.

Drawing," she said, "is a refusal to lie efficiently." She paused. "Mostly."

Hope placed the final cushion beneath the bookstore's door, where no one would ever sit.

"This one's for the future," she said. "Editorial delay."

She meant it to sound wise. It sounded like someone placing a whoopee cushion on the ground in front of a closed bookstore at dusk, which is what it was.

The street hummed. Somewhere, another prrrp—faint, accidental, unavoidable.

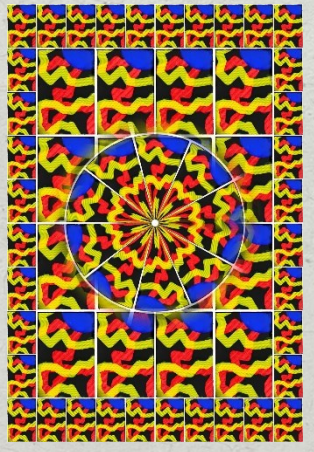
Doiriann smiled, thin but sincere. "We have cultivated something," she said.

Hope slung the empty tote over her shoulder.

"A garden of interruptions."

Neither of them was sure that was the right name. They walked off anyway, leaving Main Street less certain of itself but paying attention now—really looking—bracing for the next sound, the next correction, the next small, practical act that might be enough.

Or might not. Might just be a noise on a street where someone once tried.



CAN'T
HOLD
WAFFLES
SATURDAY
7PM

THE BIG REVEAL / REVELATION

(Full night at Geno's Rock Club, Portland – the tape that changed everything)

By 5 Tine Frog Spear

The set is already running hot. The single fuzzy boom mic—buried in its windscreen like a reluctant witness—catches the whole room: Amethyst's razor-crow delivery, Jafari's Swahili asides and guitar stabs, Pine's Polivoks snarling low while the red Casio CT-S200 throws bright plastic shards through the pawn-shop Marshall. The sideways 18th-century marching drum thumps beneath the taped-on butt tambourine, every hit shedding metallic gossip. The child-size bass, tuned dulcimer-style, slides through split paths: one low fuzz-sustain bed, the other high tremolo/chorus/octave shimmer. Everything funnels through the Lorenz V45b broadcast desk—Jafari riding the faders with mechanic's patience—then straight to the Maihak Reportofon MMK 3. Pine has already wound

the spring motor by hand, the green Irish 7" 1/4" reel loaded and threaded, oxide still carrying faint ghosts of whatever was on it before (a radio play? a sermon? someone's long-ago confession?). The tape hisses softly, waiting.

The crowd is 50-odd bodies: punks in hoodies, Lewiston locals, summer beach stragglers, a couple of older scenesters. Back wall, arms folded, stands Elias Thorne—their chief patron for two years. Envelopes of cash, strings, gas cards, quiet zine runs. Faded tartan cap, nodding like he hears something no one else does.

They're three songs in. Amethyst perches on the milk crate, feathers catching the dim stage lights. He opens with the lyrics you first gave him—fast, venomous, scalpel-sharp, the kind of roast that makes people laugh and flinch at the same time:

"You're not a polyglot dear Alex.
You're an insufferable snot with Nazi swag and emotional paralysis.

The castle was irascibly stolen in a frantic Texas holdup.
Your children look like Hottentots fed creamed scorn bleeding polyps.
Your mother never wanted you, but she never closed for cleaning.
Your father never cared for you and called your name by screaming.
You are the joke that Ruth Barnett forgave.
You are the punch line to a death row rave... "

The room leans in. Jafari grins, throws a quick Swahili echo—"Wewe ni mzaha!"—and keeps the groove locked. Pine's fingers dance across the Casio, adding bright stabs that cut against the Polivoks growl. The crowd half-chants the chorus:
Punchline! (*Punchline!*)
Death row rave! (*Rave!*)

Forgave the joke, but the grave won't save—Amethyst doesn't stop. He rides the momentum into the next verse, still fast, still vicious:

Your wit's a wilted tulip in a septic tank parade.

Your charm's a charm school dropout with a felony upgrade.

You hoard your grudges like a dragon with bad breath.
Your legacy's a footnote in the annals of regret...

Then something shifts.

He stops mid-line. The band keeps playing for half a bar—Jafari's riff hanging, Pine's keys sustaining—before they feel it too. Amethyst leans forward, beak almost touching the fuzzy boom mic. His voice drops. No more crow. No more theatrical venom. Low. Serious. Quiet enough that the tape has to strain to catch it, yet clear enough that every person in the room hears every word.

"You think the money's clean —
but the ink runs black when the lights go out...
The hand that feeds you holds the knife behind the curtain
(always has).

Your patron saint of small favors —
he's got a ledger longer than the Penobscot,
debts written in names no one speaks aloud...

Tonight the window stays open —
the cold comes in, the signal drops,
and the phone in his hand lights up with the last truth he can't delete."
Silence crashes in.

The last syllable still hangs in the air when the lights die.

Not just the stage lights. Not just Geno's. The whole block. The whole neighborhood. The whole goddamn town.
Portland goes dark.

The PA cuts with a soft pop. The Marshall stack sighs into feedback oblivion. The Maihak keeps rolling—spring motor still unwinding, tape capturing the sudden absence: crowd breathing, a few phones lighting up faces like lanterns, someone whispering "what the fuck," another person laughing nervously, then stopping.

Amethyst doesn't move. He stays perched, eyes reflecting the scattered phone glow. Pine lowers her hands from the keys. Jafari looks at the ceiling like he's waiting for the sky to fall next.

Behind the bar, the bartender's phone rings—sharp, impossible in the blackout. He answers. Listens. Face drains. Word spreads in murmurs that feel louder in the dark:
Elias Thorne. Dead. Found an hour ago in his house on the Bangor outskirts. Sitting in a chair by an open window. Phone still in his hand, screen lit, battery almost gone. He'd been typing something—maybe a confession, maybe a warning, maybe a goodbye—and never hit send. Heart attack, they'll say later. But the phone told the rest.

Years of quiet laundering. Money funneled through music funds, small grants, venue bailouts, zine presses. Small enough to stay invisible, big enough to keep the Maine underground breathing through lean winters.

Elias wasn't just a patron. He was the ledger. Names, dates, amounts. Some in the room had taken the envelopes without asking. Others had suspected and looked away. No one was clean.

The power stays out for forty-seven minutes. Long enough for the Maihak to run down naturally—spring motor sighing to a stop, the Irish reel capturing the stunned room tone, the shuffle of feet, the first choked sobs, the low Swahili prayer Jafari mutters under his breath. When the lights finally flicker back on, no one cheers. The band doesn't finish the set. They just stand there while people file out slowly, some avoiding eye contact, some staring at Amethyst like he summoned the blackout himself.

Later—days, weeks—the tape is transferred in Pro Tools. Minimal cleanup. They keep every second of blackout silence. They call it THE PATRON'S LEDGER. The cover is a single Polaroid: the open window in Elias's house,

curtain moving, phone face-down on the sill. No chalkboard this time. Just the truth.

Pine goes home to Scotch that night. They nap on the porch under a blanket. He calls her Honeybee. She doesn't tell him everything yet. But she keeps the tartan cap on the hook and wonders how much he knew.

Jafari bulk-erases another Irish reel the next afternoon. Pine winds the Maihak again. Amethyst watches them both, eyes unreadable. They keep playing. Maine punk doesn't stop for revelations. But the songs get quieter at the ends now. And every open window feels like it's listening.

The rooster didn't predict the future.
He remembered it before it happened.

THE BUSHES ARE IN DISAGREEMENT WITH THE HEAT
By Newton Caswell

A chuffing steam-engine pulse
Drag-racing a drum machine through the San Fernando Valley
Simon Rogers fingers the keys
And the sequencer vomits a neon timeline.
4:10.
The loop is a noose.
Imperial Phase.
Imperial Haze.
This Nation's Saving Grace is a bag of white powder
Dumped on the Boulevard.
SCUM-BALL.
Mark E. Smith hates the sun
He hates the sand
He hates the beer

He stands in the shadow of the Hollywood sign
Muttering at the greenery
"Uncanny," he spits
The hedges are wilting
The palm trees are liars
Nature is losing the argument against the concrete.
Listen to Scanlon's guitar—
It's not an instrument
It's an LAPD helicopter
Circling the motel roof
Whirrrr-click-whirrrr-click
Shimmering paranoia echoing off the art-deco Odeon.
And here is Brix.
The blonde intervention.
The West Coast infiltrator in the Manchester cult.
She breathes into the microphone

Detached. Seductress. Void.
“This is my happening and it freaks me out”
Russ Meyer dialogue chewed up and spat out
In a disco for people who don’t dance
The sexiest song of 1985?
Only if sex is a panic attack in a convertible.
SPELL IT OUT.
James Brown from the NME asks for a word
”Appalling,” says Mark.
How do you spell it?
L... L... L... L... A... A... A... A...
Strip the Ps. Gut the Gs.
The City of Angels is a misspelling of a disaster.
John Leckie polishes the chrome

Until the post-punk rust looks like diamonds.
Motorik bass digging a shallow grave.
Northern grime meets Sunset striptease.
Alchemy.
Repetition.
Repetition.
REPETITION.
It burrows in.
It burns out.
White snow.
Fake cold.
Real fear.
AH. AH.

STANDING

By Jacob Frieldz

The surface is acting as a second skin of the world, though it doubles nothing and dissolves the real as if it were a clerical error in a terminal report. You maintain a verticalité fragile, standing *exakt im Zentrum,* because the stability is the only motor left in a composition that refuses to provide a structural exit. The *repères*—the depth, the texture, the horizon—simply *se dérobent,* and the décor becomes a topographical map of the nervous breakdown you are currently scheduling. This clarté diffuse neutralizes time; it is a present stretch where *Wasser wirkt wie Stein* and the air is too thick to breathe without an

unassailable frequency. It is an *онтологическое одиночество, не покинут, а оставлен,* which is just a fancy way of stating you are alone with a world that refuses to carry its own load. The background is a cosmological fog or perhaps just thirty layers of peeling paint hiding the sound of the forest dying in a low-frequency drone. *Die Spiegelung* is not a classic reflex, it is a *Nachhalllinie,* a single frame frozen in a process that is metabolically expensive to justify to the financiers. If everything dissolves, what does it mean to stand, or did the lumber barons forget to inventory the absolute silence of the extracted resource? Verification complete: the water does not carry, it merely refuses to sink the socks.

No filing.
No extension,
No dignity.
Just the receipt:

yes, this is what happened
and it was necessary
and now it's over
or it isn't

or the hot dog was the real ninth cousin all along

THE 9TH COUSIN

By Vincent Lorre

The fused singularity keeps humming under Chestnut Street sleet in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which has decided to fall sideways, as if gravity filed for a six-month extension and never checked its mail.

Vance the Chihuahua proceeds. Tiny paws clicking like miniature typewriters composing furious letters to the calendar. Beard—horsehair George Bernard Shaw facsimile, spirit-gummed with the despair of a playwright who once believed ideas could outrun consequences—flaps, slaps his snout, flaps again like it's trying to secede from the dog wearing it.

Moo the cow cat follows. Lebowitz sharp turned up to eleven—sharp enough to slice fog, bureaucracy, and the last thread of

plausibility. Big Maine Coon frame swaying, black-and-white patches arranged like a Holstein that read Nietzsche, found it insufficiently cynical, and kept reading anyway. Gray T-shirt stretched across the chest: Bert from Sesame Street recast as Frida Kahlo—unibrow emphatic, felt flowers pinned in accusation, gold hoops dangling from felt ears, expression so flat it could notarize death certificates.

They argue taxes the length of the block.

"April fifteenth," Vance yaps, beard doing full interpretive dance. "It's not a date, Moo. It's a constitutional amendment written in invisible ink. Miss it and the Republic personally dispatches a SWAT team of regret to your doghouse at three a.m. with interest penalties."

Moo lows—slow, deliberate, the sound of a filing cabinet dragged across marble in

slow motion. “October fifteenth. Extensions are the last polite fiction left in late capitalism. You’re acting like April is the Rapture and you’re the only one with a ticket. Shaw, darling, even your beard knows you’re bluffing. It’s trying to defect to Canada.”

Vance snaps. “My beard is a principled anarchist. It rejects the calendar on dialectical grounds.”

Moo looks at him. Says nothing. Keeps walking.

Then, without blinking: “Your beard is a horsehair hostage situation. And Bert here would like to remind you that unibrows don’t file quarterly. They just judge. Silently. Forever. Unlike you, who judges loudly and in meter.”

The Music Hall at 28 Chestnut. Victorian bones pretending 1878 never ended. Pink brick façade blushing like it just heard the plot summary. Marquee pulsing with the smug glow of something that has already spoiled both endings. Inside: red-plush balcony seats exhaling ghosts of long-dead matinees, crystal chandelier swaying like it's drunk on its own light, opera boxes glaring down with the expression of aunts who know you didn't send thank-you notes.

They sit. Moo sprawls across the armrest like she's filing eminent domain paperwork. Vance perches. Beard aimed at the screen like a dueling pistol.

The screen ignites, already guilty.

The Ninth Cousin, directed by Roger Corman in his zero-budget, sleep-deprived, shoot-it-in-three-days confidence. Cousins Hollow fog so thick it

has its own postal code. Three hundred forty-seven residents. Every single one ninth cousin to Elliot Vance and to each other in mathematically pornographic detail.

Plastic buck teeth erupt like fungal growth after rain. Eyes cross until pupils high-five across the bridge of the nose.

“Lookin’ good, cous’!”

The line doesn’t echo. It migrates. Man two rows back grows teeth so fast they squeak. Woman in front rocks ninth-cousin tempo; her purse now wears buck teeth too. The audience transmutes into one writhing family reunion that forgot to hire a bouncer. Vance’s beard tries to crawl under the seat and apply for asylum.

Then *Escape from Goler Mountain,* directed by Shane Grant in glorious low-rent 3D stop-motion. Action figures with

buck teeth the size of hubcaps roll down a hill that used to be someone's backyard but is now auditioning for biblical topography. Ketchup-and-regret splatter flies straight into the audience.

"Cous'! Noooo! Lookin' gooood—!"

Every impact produces a wet cartoon splat that smells faintly of childhood shame and food coloring. Teenager in row G catches a glob on the tongue, crosses his eyes so hard his pupils begin orbiting like binary stars.

Lights rise. The entire balcony is now one giant ninth-cousin organism wearing novelty teeth like war paint. Teeth passed around like cursed communion wafers. Vance's beard attempts full desertion. Moo's spots swirl into a family crest that looks suspiciously like a no solicitors sign.

They flee down the side alley where hemp ropes dangle like the universe's worst jump rope.

Fleet Street. The sleet has upgraded to warm relish-flavored drizzle.

Gilley's at 175. Red-and-white lunch car squatting like it's daring the twenty-first century to try something. Worcester Lunch Car Company, circa 1940, still wearing its truck chassis the way a turtle wears denial. Red panels peeling like old sunburn, white trim defiant, barrel roof curved in stubborn optimism. An American flag flaps above a chalkboard menu that lists hot dog as if it's a philosophical position. Yellow bollards guard the perimeter like short, angry sentinels.

Inside: ten stools at a counter that has transcended marble into pure memory grease. Narrow galley kitchen hissing like

it's gossiping about the customers. Fluorescent buzz. Steam rises in cartoon curlicues carrying frankfurter perfume, vinegar shiv, onion sob, chili afterthought. Space for twelve if everyone agrees to stop breathing.

Vance hops a stool. Moo settles floor-level. Bert-Kahlo glares up like it's about to unionize the condiments.

The cook—apron now a Jackson Pollock of red—flips two dogs with the solemnity of a priest who's seen too much. Buns surrender instantly. He slides the plates across. Eyes crossed so thoroughly they're practically kissing. Teeth bucked to cartoon extremes. His voice is layered from every throat in both films, plus a faint echo of the grill:
"Lookin' good, cous'."

Vance stares at his hot dog. "This is the pinnacle of human achievement? A phallic

meat tube and a man whose face has unionized with the ninth degree of separation?"

Moo doesn't look up. "It's food, Shaw. Not a manifesto. You're having an existential crisis over a tube steak. Eat it before it files its own extension."

Vance mutters. "My beard would like a word with your optimism."

Moo lows. "Your beard is halfway to Canada."

The beard finally detaches, floats upward like a disgraced parade float, then drops into Moo's chili with a tiny, tragic splash. Spots erupt into a reluctant, psychedelic family tree. A Form 1040 ignites into ninth-cousin confetti and rains sideways. Outside, the drizzle commits fully to relish. The hot dogs vanish in two existential bites.

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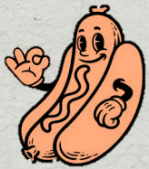

SYLLABUS ERRATICA:
A Tychean Inventory of Fixed Stars and Falling Ratios

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